

Scripture Readings & Sermon
May 3, 2020

FIRST READING: Acts 2:42–47

The Fellowship of the Believers

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

EPISTLE: 1 Peter 2:19–25

19 For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. **20** For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure; this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. **21** For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. **22** He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. **23** When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. **24** He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. **25** For you were straying like sheep but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

HOLY GOSPEL: JOHN 10:1-10

I Am the Good Shepherd

10 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. **2** But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. **3** To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. **4** When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. **5** A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." **6** This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. **8** All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. **9** I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. **10** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Sermon 18 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

“Muscle Trust”

1 Peter 2:19-25

Dear friends,

I had to tackle this epistle, because it is a standout example of taking something out of its context for sure, but our context here and now makes these lessons stand out extra hard. Peter is writing to encourage Christian churches in the face of government and regional persecution. We do not suffer this kind of persecution here in Lander and pretty much most places of the US. Our problems are systemic and driven by impersonal forces of disease, helplessness, cultural psychosis. So what does this text have to say to us?

I mentioned this text has been taken out of context, and it has. For most of chapter 2, Peter is talking about proper Christian behavior and benefits it gives our neighbor and our witness as Christians. In verse 18, just before this reading starts, you can see Peter is directing these specific words to slaves. I'll include that verse here and begin the reading: **“18 Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. 19 For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”** This seems like very specific advice that has little if anything to do with us now. We do not really have slaves, we have workers, so this advice could somewhat be directed that way I suppose. But Peter's words here reach further than Roman times class differences.

Let's take what Peter says on the nose, because that's always how you should start unless the Bible itself clues you in to do otherwise. He tells us that it is a gracious thing for us to endure sorrows while suffering unjustly. Is that so, Peter? So you're telling me, Peter, that all these lonely people cut off

from their churches, their families, worrying about the future of their country, laid off or drawing unemployment when they don't want to, are undergoing something gracious? You're telling me that all of this is gracious. I would've chosen another word, Peter.

That's the initial, visceral response. It doesn't hold up, though, with what Peter is saying. Peter is talking about the pain that men inflict on us, he's talking about human beings hurting other human beings for doing the right thing. He's not talking about life, and that's all this plague is, life. I know it doesn't seem that way, but plagues have ravaged our sinful world far more often than we care to admit. This used to be a much more common thing not a hundred years ago and now we're revisiting it. Peter is talking about persecution. Should we just leave it there, then? It doesn't apply to our current troubles, right?

I'm not willing to do that quite yet, because Peter is also talking about an attitude and a reason for it. Peter is asking us to take what men throw at us, to take what the world throws at us, graciously. Graciousness in suffering is, to put it mildly, not what we typically do. We typically don't take it lying down, we challenge it, we chafe under it, we try to get it off of us. Is that an ungracious way of dealing with suffering? It's hard to tell without going further. The Bible doesn't tell us to invite suffering into our life. It doesn't tell us to delight in it. Hear me very clearly on this, because it's important. God does not expect us to smile up at Him when we're in pain and ask Him for more, or tell Him it's okay. God does not want us to lie to Him. So what does He want?

Peter summarizes all this with Jesus. He reminds us that Jesus endured His suffering graciously, and we can see this in the Gospels across the board. From the beginning of His life, hunted by the barking-at-the-moon psychopath that was Herod, to the increasingly violent misunderstandings with the religious leadership, to the nonplussed and often frustrated confusion of the disciples, He was gracious. Jesus understood that men are men, women are women, children are children, and that we are all sinners and all limited and all trying to do what is most natural and best to us. Jesus understood the prejudices that drove the religious leadership against him. He understood the dynamics of power that led kings and rulers

to see Him as a threat. He understood the businesslike, impersonal aggression of the soldiers that nailed Him to the cross, understood it so well that He begged His father to forgive them – and us – for what we did to Him.

But make no mistake. Jesus understood it perfectly, He endured it graciously, but He in no way condoned or endorsed any of it. One of the most frustrating depictions of God prevalent in our society is a God that treats His children like a pampering father. God does not laugh at our mistakes or our sins. He doesn't ruffle our head and tell us we're silly. He doesn't tell us it's okay because it'll work out in the end. Jesus understood exactly what drove us to crucify Him, He understands the sin that piggybacks on top of everything we try to do, but He doesn't handwave it. He dealt with it, and continues to do so.

Jesus doesn't tolerate sin, He dies for it instead. He doesn't tolerate our flaws, He makes us new people instead. Jesus only took it graciously so that He could do the most gracious thing that God has ever done: He could graciously destroy sin forever in us all, break its hold on us, make us His children. God is patient with sin in the same way the hunter is patient with the prey. God was just waiting to line up the perfect shot. He didn't want a gut-shot to spoil His plan, so to speak.

That's all fine and dandy, but Peter still tells us to be gracious with suffering because Christ was gracious with suffering. Christ had the divine perspective to cling to, we don't. All we have is our lives, our work, our loved ones, our way of seeing things. We can try to empathize with other people but we don't have God's clarity. We don't have God's knowledge. How can we be gracious like Him? Well, Peter goes on: **“22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”**

All of this sounds like a description of Jesus' work, and it is, but I remind you that Jesus work doesn't stay in Jesus. Jesus does not tell us about Himself to thump His own chest. The Bible tells us about Jesus to tell us about ourselves. Jesus has changed us. Peter says it clearly. By His wounds we have been healed. What has been healed? Our sin has been healed, the injuries it does to our psyche, to our reason, to our perspective, they're healed. What does all that mean? It means that Jesus has made it so that we can be gracious with our life. I don't know how to do that any more than you do, but the Bible states it plainly. Jesus tells us what He has made us and we can only trust that is what we are, because we don't usually see it. The sinner in us is still strong but it isn't all we are, it isn't what we really are. We were straying like sheep, but now we're not.

Trust is a muscle. I have been learning this for a while now. It has to be exercised or it gets slack. Trusting God is the same thing. And to exercise trust, it needs to be stretched, ripped, and then rebuilt, just like muscle. Sometimes our sin tears it up, and God rebuilds it. Sometimes God Himself stretches our trust, and it creaks and groans like overstressed metal. I'm mixing my metaphors here so clearly I need to stop, but you see the point. Not lightly does Peter tell us to entrust ourselves to Him, and in these times God has engineered circumstances to make this deliberately difficult. Not because He is cruel, but because He wants us to work our trust muscles.

I won't turn this into an 80s workout video and tell you to work it, Christians. But I will say that Christ is perfect at knowing when to push and when to back down, even if we aren't. He is the shepherd and overseer of our souls, not just our lives or bodies here on this earth. He knows you down to the stuff you can't see, past the DNA and the genocode and into that invisible, essential you that only He can see. He knows when to push, when to pull, and when to back off. Entrust yourself to Jesus.

Amen.